

Pilot Officer
Andrew
Charles
Mynarski VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

by Lord Ashcroft

PILOT OFFICER ANDREW CHARLES MYNARSKI VC VIA LARRY MILBERRY

My half-century long passion for the Victoria Cross stems from the fact that behind every award of the decoration there is a remarkable story. However, very few VCs from the medal's long and rich history involve a tale quite as astonishing as that of a Canadian airman serving in Britain during World War Two.

Andrew Charles Mynarski was born in the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba Province, Canada, to Polish immigrants on October 14, 1916. He was one of six children and had two brothers and three sisters. Mynarski, who was known to family and friends as 'Andy', was educated at King Edward and Isaac Newton Elementary Schools, both in Winnipeg, later graduating from St John's Technical School, also in Winnipeg.

At the age of 16, and because his father had died, he started a job as a leather worker – more specifically a chamois cutter for a furrier – to help support his large family.

Close-knit crew

In November 1940, he enlisted in the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, a militia unit, but on September 29 the following year he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force having attended its recruitment centre in Winnipeg. After basic training at No.2 Wireless School, Calgary, Alberta, he received further instruction at No.3 Bombing and Gunnery School, Macdonald, Manitoba, where he passed out as an air gunner.



Mynarski was promoted to sergeant in December 1942, shortly before travelling overseas to the United States and, later, Britain early in 1943. There, he joined 16 Operational Training Unit in March 1943. That June, he joined the

THE STATUE OF MYNARSKI SALUTING OUTSIDE THE FORMER RAF MIDDLETON ST GEORGE OFFICERS' MESS VIA ROGER LINDSAY

1661 Heavy Conversion Unit and the same month he was promoted to flight sergeant.

In October 1943, he was posted to 9 Squadron, a Lancaster bomber unit based at RAF Bardney in Lincolnshire. In December 1943, he



LANCASTER MK.XS OF 419 SQUADRON AT MIDDLETON ST GEORGE, JUNE 1945 DND/RCAF

was dispatched to the 1668 Heavy Conversion Unit and, in the same month, was promoted to Warrant Officer Class 2.

In April 1944, Mynarski went to serve with 419 'Moose' Squadron, RCAF, based at Middleton St George, County Durham. His role was to fly in No.6 Bomber Group, which had Halifax bombers. His first operational sortie took place on the night of April 22/23 and it was to bomb targets in Laon, France.

Having then completed a conversion course on his squadron being re-equipped with Lancasters, Mynarski became mid-upper gunner in a seven-man crew and participated in several sorties aimed at destroying German defences and other targets prior to the D-Day landings.

More specifically, his crew was chosen to take part in General (later President) Dwight D Eisenhower's 'Transportation Plan', in which the USAAF and RAF were designated to destroy Western Europe's rail, road and bridge networks to prevent the Germans bringing reinforcements to the Normandy beachheads.

They were a close-knit team – at a time when the life expectancy of bomber crews was measured in months – who had flown a dozen sorties together. After every mission, they returned to base and asked for a slice of their favourite lemon meringue pie, made by one of the cooks. The gunners, Mynarski and Pilot Officer Pat Brophy, had grown particularly close and the former even bailed the latter out of jail after a scrap. Before going to bed,

“Brophy was in no doubt of the three words that had been uttered: “Good night, sir.” Mynarski then leapt from the stricken aircraft”

Mynarski, an NCO, tended to give Brophy, an officer, an exaggerated salute and say: “Good night, sir!”

Trapped in the tail

On the evening of June 12, 1944, just six days after D-Day, their Lancaster took off on its 13th sortie, heading for the railway yard at Cambrai, northern France. En route, a German Junkers Ju-88 night fighter streaked under the Lancaster. Three explosions rocked the aircraft and at 12.13am (June 13) Captain Art de Breyne gave the signal for the crew to abandon the aircraft.

However, just as Mynarski was about to jump, he saw Brophy, the rear gunner, struggling to free himself. As soon as he realised his friend was in difficulty, Mynarski crawled on his hands and knees to the tail. When the aeroplane had been hit, its hydraulic system had been shattered, locking the turret at such an angle that Brophy was unable to escape.

First with an axe and, then, with his bare hands, Mynarski frantically tried to free Brophy, but the flames had engulfed the aircraft. “Go back, Andrew! Get out!” shouted Brophy. Eventually, by this point with serious burns, Mynarski, seeing he could do no more, crawled back to the escape hatch, stood in his burning clothes, glanced towards his friend, and, as he had done so

many times before, saluted and said something aloud. Brophy could not hear what had been said, but he was in no doubt of the three words that had been uttered: “Good night, sir.” Mynarski then leapt from the stricken aircraft.

Brophy was by this point alone and hurtling towards what seemed his inevitable death – especially as there were five tons of explosive just yards from where he was trapped. It seemed pointless, but as the bomber was about to hit the ground, Brophy instinctively adopted the crash position. However, just before the Lancaster slammed into a field, its port wing hit a large tree, which not only tore off the burning wing, but undoubtedly saved Brophy from certain death.

“The resulting whiplash effect on the tail of the aircraft snapped my turret around and the doors flew open, freeing me from my potentially explosive and flaming prison,” Brophy later recalled. “I came to rest against a small tree about 30 to 50ft from the remains of the aircraft. That is when I heard two explosions together. Only when I felt solid earth tremble under me did I realise the crash was over, and somehow I was alive.”

Outstanding courage

Six of the seven crew survived their ordeal and were found by French farmers and then helped by the Resistance. Four made it back to Britain, while the other two, including Brophy, were captured by the Germans and imprisoned.

The only member of the crew to perish was... Mynarski. He survived his parachute jump, but died shortly afterwards as a result of his serious burns. Stocky, dark-haired and with an infectious grin, he was aged 27 and unmarried.

It was only on Brophy's release in 1945 that the full story could be told, and appropriate steps were taken to ensure that Mynarski received a posthumous VC. Indeed, he became the first member of the RCAF to receive the prestigious award. Furthermore, Mynarski was posthumously promoted to the rank of pilot officer. His VC was announced in *The London Gazette*

MYNARSKI'S CREW (FROM L TO R): PAT BROPHY (REAR GUNNER), JIM KELLY (WIRELESS OPERATOR), ROY VIGARS (FLIGHT ENGINEER), 'ART' DE BREYNE (PILOT), ANDREW MYNARSKI (MID-UPPER GUNNER), JACK FRIDAY (BOMB AIMER) AND BOB BODIE (NAVIGATOR) DND/RCAF



on October 11, 1946, when his lengthy citation ended: "The rear gunner had a miraculous escape when the aircraft crashed.

"He subsequently testified that, had Pilot Officer Mynarski not attempted to save his comrade's life, he could have left the aircraft in safety and would, doubtless, have escaped death.

"Mynarski must have been fully aware that in trying to free the rear gunner he was almost certain to lose his own life. Despite this, with outstanding courage and complete disregard for his own safety, he went to the rescue. Willingly accepting the danger, Pilot Officer Mynarski lost his life by a conspicuous act of heroism which called for valour of the highest order."

Mynarski's mother, Anna, received her son's posthumous VC from the Right Honourable R F McWilliams, Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba.

Mynarski is buried at Méharicourt Communal Cemetery, near Amiens, France. There are numerous memorials to him, both in Canada and Britain. His name is also on the RAF Memorial at St Clement Danes in London. In 1989, his family loaned his VC to Canadian Air Command so it could go on display at the Mynarski Memorial Room of the Headquarters, 1 Canadian Air Division, in Winnipeg.

A bronze statue of Mynarski was dedicated in 2005 at RAF Middleton St George, the base where he served. The memorial depicts Mynarski at the rear of the stricken aircraft, his right arm raised in a salute. In his home city of Winnipeg, a school, a park and a cadet squadron have been named in his honour and there is a further memorial to Mynarski.

Moreover, Lancaster FM213, the airworthy example operated by the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum wears a 419 Squadron scheme – specially KB726 'VR-A', Mynarski's bomber – and is known as the 'Mynarski Memorial Lancaster'.

Divine providence

I first came across the astonishing story of Mynarski's brave action – and Brophy's unbelievable escape – two decades ago when I was researching my book *Victoria Cross Heroes*, first published in 2006 to mark the 150th anniversary of the VC. I currently own the largest collection of VCs in the



"I'll always believe that a divine providence intervened to save me because of what I had seen"

PILOT OFFICER GEORGE 'PAT' BROPHY, 419 SQUADRON, RCAF

world, yet few stories of bravery have moved me more than this incident and it was reconstructed for a television series that I presented in conjunction with my book. However, I do not own the Mynarski medal group that is situated in the Air Force Heritage Park Museum in Winnipeg.

In 1965, Brophy wrote an article about his friend, Mynarski, and concluded: "I'll always believe that a divine providence intervened to save me because of what I had seen – so the world might know of a gallant man who laid down his life for a friend." The interaction between friendship and courage

is centuries old. In The Bible, the Book of John puts it perfectly: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lays down his life for his friends." During my near-lifelong fascination with the concept of bravery, I have come across countless incidents in which an individual risked, and in many cases gave his life to protect or rescue a comrade who was in mortal danger. Yet to me it is this single story involving Mynarski and Brophy that, above all others, captures the extent to which the close bond between two men can inspire an act of barely believable daring and self-sacrifice. **BW**

MYNARSKI'S MOTHER IS SHOWN THE PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH OF HER SON IN AN OTTAWA RCAF MESS. SHE IS WITH AIR MARSHAL ROBERT LECKIE (LEFT) AND FLYING OFFICER ARTHUR DE BREYNE, THE PILOT OF MYNARSKI'S BOMBER TORONTO STAR/GETTY

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *Victoria Cross Heroes* was published in 2006 and is available in hardback and paperback.

For more information, visit victoriacrossheroes.com Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more

information, visit iwm.org.uk/heroes and details about his VC collection may be found at lordashcroftmedals.com For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit lordashcroft.com

For Lord Ashcroft's work on gallantry, visit lordashcroftonbravery.com Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft

